

BEYOND THE DISCRETE TRIAL

Application of the Concept in a Variety of Settings and Best Practices for Engaging Multiple Students

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Once the “classic” discrete trial is mastered, the *real* teaching can begin. The application of the concept of the discrete trial into all settings in a student’s environment will enable the student to maintain, generalize, and learn new skills in the natural setting.

Tips for application in other settings:

- Keep in mind the critical components of the discrete trial (and behavior in general): A-B-C. Antecedent-Behavior-Consequence. In the case of teaching a skill, the A is the direction, the B is the desired skill being demonstrated, and the C is the reinforcement.
- Remember to position yourself to begin with getting the student’s attention. For example, don’t give a direction from behind the student. When you get the student’s attention, give the instruction quickly.
- Ask yourself prior to beginning a “trial,” “Can I follow through with this right now?” If the answer is Yes, go ahead and proceed. If the answer is, No, configure the situation to be able to follow through, or delay beginning the “trial” until you (or another staff member) can follow through with it.
- Prompting is just as relevant and possible in the natural setting as it is in the classic setting. You may have to be more creative, but it is still a crucial step. Remember to always start with the least intrusive prompt.
 - Standard prompt hierarchy (from least-to-most intrusive): independent→ verbal→ gesture→ model→ partial physical→ full physical (hand-over-hand)
- Remember that the third part of the contingency is reinforcement and this is the step in which the learning occurs. ALWAYS reinforce correct responses or approximations. In the natural environment, ideally, the reinforcement is the natural result of the student’s compliance (but not always).
- Examples (let’s practice):
 - Student is standing at the door. How can you use a discrete trial to teach a skill here?
 - Student is reaching for popcorn out of reach on the table. What skill are you working on and what does the trial look like?
 - A student screams when a worksheet is presented. How can you teach a skill in a discrete trial to appease the situation without reinforcing the problem behavior?
 - A student is wandering around the classroom but should be sitting at a table. How can you get the student back on task by using a discrete trial?
 - It’s lunchtime and the student has to eat a bite of sandwich before getting his chocolate milk. What would a discrete trial look like in this situation?

Tips for using “classic” discrete trial with 2 students at a time in a work setting:

- Ensure that you have several choices of potential reinforcers available that are tangible. Prior to beginning the work session, do a brief preference assessment:

- Present the choice of 2 items, ask, “What do you want?” If the student reaches for one, let him have it. Repeat with the other student. You can also use PECS to present this choice.
- Once the students have their preferred items, make sure your materials are organized, tidy, and **out of reach of the students**. They should not have access to the preferred item for longer than 30 seconds at a time.
- Select which student will receive a turn first (most likely the student with a shorter attention span). Begin by saying, “My turn,” and getting the preferred object from him. Keep the object present while proceeding with the discrete trial. Depending on the skill level of the student, you may give the preferred object back after the first trial or you may repeat up to 3 trials before presenting the object.
- Once you have given that student their earned preferred object, it is the other student’s turn. Proceed with the same routine with that student while the first student engages briefly with his preferred object.
- Your discrete trial(s) with each student should not take longer than 1-2 minutes total. In other words, each student should not wait longer than that to have a turn with you, or time with the preferred object.
- Re-probe reinforcers frequently, particularly if the student does not appear interested in the object.
- This type of session should be fast-paced, exciting, and engaging for both students.
- If students engage in problem behavior during the session such as out-of-seat, re-probe the reinforcers for that student until you find something he will attend to and work for. If this takes longer than 2 minutes, prompt the student to ask for “break” and let him have a break for the 1-2 minutes you work with the other student. When it is that student’s turn again, bring him back to the table, probe reinforcers, and start again.
- Examples (let’s practice):
 - One student working on matching, the other working on identifying objects.
 - One student out of seat, the other on-task.
 - Two students working on the same task (can go faster).

Questions?